



LOS ANGELES

Thomas Lawson

David Kordansky Gallery // September 8–October 20

TITLED "IN THE SHADOW of the Beast," this exhibition continues Lawson's argument for the enduring relevance of painting as a medium and the central role of the figurative within it. The imagery in these canvases borrows from the ranks of art history, revisiting the visual language of representation employed in cave drawings, Classical sculpture, and 19th-century figure studies. Men, headless statues, a woman, and a centaur float above flat, bright swaths of color amid disparate elements—a wolf's head, a bell, a beach ball, blood, or an excised limb.

This appropriation of historical imagery reads not as irony but as theory. It seems a necessary means of critically assessing the past and giving it a new visual context for the future. This is by no means an easy task. Through the paintings runs a current of conflict, often violent and primitive, which moves from fear and anxiety to analysis. In *The Bell*, 2012, a man grimaces, covering his ears in reaction to the clanging of an oversized bell; a carousel rod pierces a horse's eye in *Theoretical Picture*, 2012; and in *Subject to Debate*, 2012, headless statues stand in conversation, splattered in bloodlike red paint. These works suggest allegories not only for the history of painting but for Lawson's own creative struggle.

The role of the artist is constantly visible by way of dramatic elements and unexpected choices. Lawson's brushstroke is always evident, and in some works he stamps hand- and footprints across the canvas. Elsewhere, abstract shapes slide off representational characters, conflating these divergent artistic approaches.

As a writer, Lawson has for years been a driving force in the critical discourse on contemporary art. In his essays, he champions painting as the artistic medium that can best "deconstruct the illusions of the present" and argues for the return of representation to a place of critical respect and prominence. One cannot help but wonder if the titular beast of the exhibition is none other than this beast of burden Lawson has adopted. The paintings are self-conscious, systematic, and academic—exercises in the implementation of Lawson's own analysis. For all their intellectual underpinnings, however, they retain a sense of mystery. The meaning of the paintings is only partially revealed, and their juxtaposition leaves room for multiple interpretations. The strength of these works lies in posing more questions than answers, allowing Lawson's artistic vision to exist as a work in progress. —Emily Ellis Fox

ABOVE:
Thomas Lawson
Endurance, 2012.
Oil on canvas,
72 x 84 in.